



How Depression Facilitates Self-Transformation

“You desire to know the art of living, my friend? It is contained in one phrase: make use of suffering.”

Henri-Frédéric Amiel, Amiel's Journal

Depression is the darkest of human experiences. It saps our energy, weakens our will to work, destroys our desire to socialize, decreases our motivation to exercise, and sometimes even jeopardizes our will to live. When depressed, the future looks hopeless, and our self turns into the heaviest of burdens. But perhaps the most pernicious thing about depression is that when caught in its grip it can seem as if there is no way out and no value to the experience. As we will explore in this video, hidden in the darkness of depression is a psychological treasure which can facilitate self-transformation.

“Depression is not necessarily pathological. It often foreshadows a renewal of the personality or a burst of creative activity. There are moments in human life when a new page is turned.”

Carl Jung, Collected Works Volume 16

One of the ways modern psychologists try to understand and treat depression is by isolating its cause. The ending of a relationship, a failed business, the death of a loved one, loneliness, poverty, trauma, or biological, genetic, or chemical predispositions, are some of the many causes which psychologists fixate on. The Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung believed that facilitating healing was best accomplished not by focusing on the cause of the depression, but on the *telos* – that is, the purpose, end, or goal a depression is aiming at.

“Depressions always have to be understood teleologically.”

Carl Jung, Conversations with Carl Jung

Or as the psychologist Edward Edinger wrote:

“If you have a dynamic understanding of the nature of the psyche, you will realize, as Jung tells us, that depression, like all other psychological symptomatology, has a telos at its core – a latent purpose – if one can understand it purposefully.”

Edward Edinger, The Sacred Psyche

While the purpose of a depression differs among individuals, in general, a depression can be conceived as the psyche’s attempt to elicit some sort of dramatic change; be it a re-organization of life following a loss, a change in a conscious attitude which has grown stale, or the discovery of unrealized aspects of the personality that one needs in order to rise to the challenges of life. In the *Road Less Traveled*, M. Scott Peck wrote:

“Since patients are not yet consciously willing or ready to recognize that the “old self” and “the way things used to be” are outdated, they are not aware that their depression is signaling that major change is required for successful and evolutionary adaptation. The fact that the unconscious is one step ahead of the conscious may seem strange to lay readers; it is, however, a fact that applies not only in this specific instance but so generally that it is a basic principal of mental functioning.”

M. Scott Peck, The Road Less Travelled

It becomes evident that the purpose of a depression is to facilitate dramatic changes when we reflect on the fact that depression is common during transitional periods, when we are crossing the bridge from one stage of life to another. In mid-life, for example, we begin the slow decline towards old age and death, and during this period depression serves as a catalyst for an inner transformation that prepares us for the second half of life. In volume 8 of his *Collected Works* Carl Jung observed that:

“Statistics show a rise in the frequency of mental depressions in men about forty. In women the neurotic difficulties generally begin somewhat earlier. We see that in this phase of life—between thirty-five and forty—an important change in the human psyche is in preparation...one’s previous inclinations and interests begin to weaken and others take their place.”

Carl Jung, Collected Works Volume 8

Depressions among young men are also common, as to cross the bridge from adolescence to manhood a major change in the psyche must take place. A young man must overcome his childish dependencies and adapt himself to the challenges, conflicts, and responsibilities of adulthood. In the past, this psychological change was facilitated via culturally sanctioned rites of passage. The male elders of the community subjected a boy to a series of trials, tests, rituals, and initiatory sufferings, which served to break down the boy’s infantile ego and activate his masculine potentials. As one of the characteristics of the modern world is the disappearance of meaningful rites of passage, the psyche of young males is responding to this cultural lack by generating a depression that can initiate the transition from boyhood to manhood.

“For the soul, depression is an initiation, a rite of passage.”

Thomas Moore, *Care of the Soul*

Or as the psychologist James Davies theorizes in *The Importance of Suffering*:

“Here we consider the idea that depression is like the ritual elder who snatches the child from his mother’s arms to teach him life’s lessons in the ritual grove. This analogy is especially apposite when we consider societies where the role of the elder has largely disappeared. Individuals in contemporary society, unlike their neighbours in small-scale traditional societies, are progressively bereft of elders who can safely shepherd them through the changes they need to make. Could it be that in the absence of elders something within the contemporary individual emerges to exert a surrogate initiatory function? Could it be that when our social institutions fail to take us down ritually, our organisms contrive other ways to force our descent?”

James Davies, *The Importance of Suffering*

The primary way in which depression facilitates change is by withdrawing our psychological energy from the external world. Most of the time, most of our energy is fixated on things outside of us. We work a job, cultivate relationships, pursue our goals, make money, exercise, seek stimuli to entertain us, and rarely is our psychological energy directed inwards to the contents of our psyche. But when depressed, external phenomena lose their allure, causing us to enter into a sort of psychological hibernation. The etymology of the word depression means to “de-press”, to press down. Or as Jung put it: “*‘Depression’ means literally ‘being forced downwards.’*” We feel this downward push of depression physically, as our body feels heavy – like lead. But the most significant downward pressing occurs in the mind. According to Jung, our psychological energy, or what he calls libido, withdraws not only from the external world but also from our consciousness, and descends into the unconscious. Or as Jung explained:

[In depression]...libido [is withdrawn] from the conscious world... as a result of this we must, according to the law of energy, expect an accumulation of value—i.e., libido—in the unconscious.”

Carl Jung, *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology*

In the unconscious lies the mythological “treasure hard to attain”, which, psychologically speaking, are elements of the unconscious, such as instincts, drives, and unactualized aspects of our personality, which, if discovered and integrated into our conscious personality, have the ability to transform us. For example, a highly rational person may have his capacity for feeling, intuition, or creativity, hidden in the depths of the unconscious. He may reach a point where his one-sided rational attitude towards life has grown stale and meaningless. In response, his psyche may produce a depression, directing his energy inward and downward for the purpose of activating the unconscious contents that are needed to expand his consciousness and renew his life. Or as the psychologist James Hollis writes:

“It takes great courage to value depression, to respect it, not to try to medicate it away or distract ourselves from its misery. Down there is potential meaning, split off from consciousness but alive, dynamic. Although a depression robs conscious life of energy, that energy is not gone. It is in the underworld, and like Orpheus who goes down there to confront, perhaps to charm, the lower powers, so we too are obliged to go down into the depression and find our soul’s greatest treasure.”

James Hollis, Swamplands of the Soul

It is an archetypal idea that the greatest treasures lie in the deepest depths. For this reason, to extract the value latent in a depression, it is necessary to cultivate the courage to fully descend into a depressive state, with as little resistance as possible. In more colloquial terms, we must voluntarily go down towards rock bottom, for as James Davies observed: “*much emotional suffering will be simply prolonged or even rendered unproductive by its not being allowed to reach its full depth.*” The notion that valuable insights and energies are discovered at rock bottom, and that avoiding the depths of suffering can leave us stuck in a purgatory of depression, has led some renowned therapists to adopt the strategy of nudging patients towards rock bottom. The 20th century British psychoanalyst Neville Symington once treated a young woman whose life was crippled by obsessional neuroses and chronic depression, and as he explains:

“One day she had a vision of her past, strewn with sick episodes, and I said to her, ‘perhaps this is your life.’ I felt terrible about saying it, for she was only young, but I think it was a turning point for her. I sensed that it would have been a mistake not to say it, a mistake to protect her from that despair.”

Neville Symington, Narcissism: A New Theory

In a letter to a depressed woman, Carl Jung explained how, if in her position, he would descend into the dark depths voluntarily. As he wrote:

“When the darkness grows denser, I would penetrate to its very core and ground, and would not rest until amid the pain a light appeared to me...I would turn in rage against myself and with the heat of my rage I would melt my lead. I would renounce everything and engage in the lowest activities should my depression drive me to violence. I would wrestle with the dark angel until he dislocated my hip. For he is also the light and the blue sky which he withholds from me...there is an instinct either to back out of it or to go down to the depths. But no half-measures or half-heartedness.”

Carl Jung, Letters of C. G. Jung: Volume I, 1906-1950

In accepting our depression and riding its regressive moods down into the depths, it is critical that we maintain a sense of objectivity and do not allow the dark angel of depression to lead us into destructive actions that have permanent consequences. Towards this end, it can be helpful to personify our depression and interact with it as we would a close friend. We can listen to our depression, value its viewpoint, and try to discern what it is aiming at, what it wants, and why. But we should never uncritically believe everything it tells us, nor blindly follow its promptings or act on its destructive moods.

...when a fit of depression comes upon him, he must no longer force himself to some kind of work in order to forget, but must accept his depression and give it a hearing. Now this is the direct opposite of succumbing to a mood, which is so typical of neurosis. It is no weakness, no spineless surrender, but a hard achievement, the essence of which consists in keeping your objectivity despite the temptations of the mood, and in making the mood your object, instead of allowing it to become in you the dominating subject.

Carl Jung, Collected Works Volume 7

The renowned Russian writer Leo Tolstoy is an example of a man who maintained his objectivity during an especially harsh depression, which he fell into shortly after reaching the heights of fame and worldly success. In his book *A Confession*, Tolstoy wrote that:

“I felt that something had broken within me on which my life had always rested, that I had nothing left to hold on to, and that morally my life had stopped. An invincible force impelled me to get rid of my existence, in one way or another....”

Leo Tolstoy, A Confession

Instead of succumbing to this force, Tolstoy maintained his objectivity and persevered in his depression. He continued descending downwards into his feelings of desolation and meaninglessness. He abstained from anesthetizing his suffering with pills or alcohol, and he did not shy away from what he called “the jabbing questions”: “*Why should I live? Why should I do anything? Is there in life any purpose which the inevitable death which awaits me does not undo and destroy?*” (*Leo Tolstoy, A Confession*). As a result of his objective perseverance, after 3 years of unending psychological darkness, Tolstoy reached rock bottom where he found the treasure hard to attain. Embryonic aspects of his personality, previously dormant in his unconscious, awakened; and Tolstoy emerged from his depression as a man reborn.

“In every case, one has to ask the fundamental question, what is the meaning of my depression? The well with no bottom always has a bottom, but we must swim down there to see it.”

James Hollis, Swamplands of the Soul

Or as Carl Jung echoed:

“Only when we bear our situation and accept our depression will it be possible for us to change internally.”

Carl Jung, Children's Dreams Seminar

To help us endure a battle with depression, it is useful to recount some of the benefits which grow in the soil of depression. James Davies references a Dutch study conducted in 2004 which concluded that people who experience a prolonged period of depression are better able to cope with adversity. Depression appears to make them more resilient, and psychologically stronger. Davies also shares anecdotes from his own practice of patients whose lives were dramatically transformed by a depressive episode. For example, one of Davies' patients started a successful business 8 months after emerging from a depression which almost destroyed him, and as his patient explained:

“When you have been so low, so at the end of life, there is only one way to go – up. Nothing could be as bad as what I went through, so what do I have to fear now? My experience of surviving depression has made me less afraid of life. But I am more courageous not because the world has changed, but because I have changed. The fear of losing everything used to stop me from attempting anything. But if I lose money now, so what! Poverty will not be as bad as where I have been ... and where I have been I have survived ... knowing this makes me stronger.”

James Davies, The Importance of Suffering

Nietzsche wrote that: *“Whoever, at any time, has undertaken to build a new heaven has found the strength for it in his own hell.”* Although few would willingly seek out depression, when we find ourselves in psychological hell, we should remember that the dark angel of depression might have a benevolent purpose. It may be facilitating significant change, and pushing our psychological energy downwards towards the discovery of new energies and potentials, which will lead to a renewal of life. Or as James Davies concludes:

“When most people think about the future, they dream up ways they might live happier lives. But notice this phenomenon. When people remember the crucial events that formed them, they don’t usually talk about happiness. It is usually the ordeals that seem most significant. Most people shoot for happiness but feel formed through suffering.”

James Davies, The Importance of Suffering